The Ombuds Office Activity Report
1997 to 1998

Ombuds Office Reports Busy First Year

The Office of the University Ombuds today released public data from its first report to the community. The report covers the period from the office inception, March 1, 1997, and runs through the end of the last academic year, August 31, 1998.

According to the report the office handled a total of 129 cases with 54% of them having concerns pertaining to the broad category, Employment and Workplace (see figure 1).

The office assisted inquirers in finding informal ways to resolve problems. As patterns of concerns developed the office was able to communicate suggestions for policy or procedural change to the appropriate decision-makers.

Issues: From Harassment to Grade Disputes
Inquirers to the ombuds office were often referred to other departments after a consultation and upon advice from the ombuds. In other cases the ombuds helped inquirers evaluate options on how to proceed with handling difficult decisions. At other times the ombuds conducted fact-finding investigations, engaged in shuttle diplomacy and mediated or facilitated disputes directly.
Of 287 separate specific issues brought to the ombuds' attention (one inquirer could raise more than one issue) the top four most frequently occurring were: Workplace Environment, Incivility, Policies and Procedures and Work Conflicts with Supervisors. In several cases, people who felt harassed sought assistance in determining options and students often used the ombuds office in a grade dispute to explore the procedure for appealing a grade.

"The purpose is to give people a place to share issues in a completely confidential manner," said John Barkat, University Ombuds, "and also to provide an office which can track patterns of aggregated issues and alert the institution to areas which might need change."

**Office Served All Constituencies**

As far as office usage is concerned, inquirers represented all major divisions of the university and included Staff/Administration (54%), followed by Students (29%), Faculty (9%) and Alumni & Parents (8%).

![Figure 2](image)

Additionally, inquirers used the offices from all campuses with 44% originating from the New York Campus and 47% from Westchester. Graduate students comprised 12% while undergrads comprised 18% of all inquirers. More females (67%) used the office than males (28%).

"Our goal is to make the ombuds office a safe place for all members of the community to share concerns," said Mr. Barkat, "while these numbers might indicate that some areas and/or populations faced fewer issues we want to make sure that lack of usage does not mean that some people were not aware of the office." As a result the ombuds office will be designing a web page this summer and working on creating and distributing better materials to the community.

**An Agent for Change**

While the office clearly assists inquirers by hearing concerns, mediating conflicts and ensuring that all members of the community are treated fairly, the role of ombuds is also one which tries to change the organization. "The ombudsman's role is to assist in problem solving, to serve as a
consultant to management and to educate the community in more collaborative ways of working together," said Barkat.

Thus, the ombuds office also conducted or participated in 18 different training programs attended by over 420 members of the Pace Community. These included areas such as: team building, sexual harassment, negotiation, mediation, management skills, and communicating across cultures.

Additionally, recommendations from the ombuds office led to several changes including the creation of a new orientation program for managers of student employees. "This resulted from concerns shared with the ombuds and follow-up focus groups conducted by the ombuds and human resources," noted Mr. Barkat.

Additional policy suggestions include looking at a revised smoking policy for the university, the creation of performance reviews which include anonymous input from direct reports and colleagues—as well as the supervisor. "These ideas have been shared and were well received," notes Barkat.

Managerial Resource
The office was also utilized by several managers when facing difficult management decisions. The concerns ranged from handling staff conflicts, to building more productive teams. As a result the office was called upon to conduct team-building retreats and to conduct confidential internal audits of employee issues and concerns.

As a result of this usage the ombuds office is developing a small resource center for managers on both campuses. Included are books and videos on supervision, handling complaints of harassment and discrimination, and resolving departmental conflicts. A listing of resources will be available on the ombuds webpage in the fall.

"Hopefully it will encourage managers to become more aware that there are resources out there which may address the very issue(s) they are dealing with," says Barkat.

Keeping Busy
"We have seen a definite increase in usage of the office," notes Mr. Barkat, and hopefully as more people become aware of how it can be of assistance, they will seek us out."

The office received generally favorable comments as a result of a survey of a random sampling of people who used the ombuds office, with 84% of respondents feeling that evaluating options with the ombuds was very or extremely helpful to their situation.

The Office of the Ombuds is available to all members of the Pace Community when they have an issue, concern or problem and need a confidential resource to help determine what their options are. While the office is not able to change any policy or procedure, it can investigate issues and make suggestions to the appropriate decision-makers. No information is kept which attaches an individual to a concern, and the aggregated data is used to develop suggestions for improving the Pace Community. To contact the ombuds you may call extension 1111, or email Ombuds@pace.edu (please note that as with any email correspondence—confidentiality cannot be guaranteed).